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Women in African Traditional Politics

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THE SOCIO-LEGAL POSITION OF WOMEN
IN CHANGING SOCIETY
Guest editors: Carol LaPrairie and Els Baerends

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WOMEN IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL POLITICS

Kofi E. Agorsah

Introduction

Many societies use sex differences as a fundamental basis in role allocation. A growing area of controversy and research in the study of these role differentiations concerns the degree to which male and female role allocations are based upon inherent biological differences. At one extreme, differences in temperament, aptitude and many areas of human behaviour, such as politics, are assumed to be biologically based, while at the other extreme, these are viewed as acquired during the process of human experience, especially in socialisation and adaptation (Haviland 1981).

Until recently, discussion of sexual role differentiation has been mainly concerned with economic and certain other obvious activities, and very little has been said about political roles. In discussions of African politics, there is a tendency to put so much emphasis on important offices held by men that women appear to have little involvement. This impression needs to be rectified as history shows the survival of any traditional society has developed through women-related events. The picture, however, has often been dominated by men (Dennet 1906; Adu 1949).

This article attempts to trace, by use of archaeological, historical and cultural evidence, certain structural features of African political systems that provide specific roles for women and the significance of these structures for African politics (compare Canham 1949; Badu 1965; Adu 1949; Busia 1951). It will be shown that in some cases the bases for the development of such political structures continue to exist in some African political systems of modern times. Examples

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from Egypt, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria and other countries are used in the discussion to emphasize the significance of some of the roles played by women in African politics.

Background

The African continent has an extremely long human history that spans several million years and occupies a geographical area of approximately 20% of the world's landmass. It spans the three tropic lines and presents a great diversity of faunal and floral life and the development of varied human groups. Owing to its history, size, widely-varied environmental conditions and consequent heterogeneity of social forms, and differences in experience and in knowledge of such experience, one would be unable to refer to a single sexual role that obtains equally across the continent. For this reason, specific examples are discussed and generalisations are only provided by way of explanation.

Historical examples

Egypt

There are many examples of the importance of the position of women in African history. From the tombs of one of the most prominent kings of Egypt - the tomb of Tutankhamun - dated some 3500 years ago, belonging to the 18th dynasty of the New Kingdom of Egypt, there is clear evidence that women played very important roles in the organisation of the Egyptian Kingdom. From collections relating to the burial chamber, there is a graceful figure of a female portraying the goddess *Selket*, whose emblem was a scorpion. *Selket* was one of the four goddesses who stood outside a gilded wooden shrine that housed a chest containing Tutankhamun's mummified internal organs. *Selket* had a divine role which included funerary duties, childbirth and nursing. She was noted as well for her control of magic which provided strong support for the survival of the King (Diop 1979; Davidson 1978).

Tutankhamun reigned from 1334 to 1325 B.C., a period of only nine years. His reign marked one of the most glorious periods of Egypt's long and distinguished history (Davidson 1978). During this period the practice of having a young Pharaoh marry his sister (a marriage with theological implications) was in effect. Since the Queen was regarded as the wife of Amun, the state God of Egypt, and the King

as the god's son, a marriage between the royal brother and sister stresses the divinity of both King and Queen. The importance of the woman's role is clear. As Queen, she helped to sustain the divine nature of the King.

In the course of the 18th dynasty, this practice was modified. However, kings born of minor wives were often married to the most legitimate royal heiress to validate their own position in the succession. At the back of Tutankhamun's throne in the tomb archaeologists found an art work covered with a sheet of gold and with the graceful figures of Tutankhamun and his queen inlaid with coloured glass and carnelian. This piece emphasizes the importance that the Egyptians attached to both King and Queen. In addition, a wooden chest, one of the most important works of art in the tomb of Tutankhamun, is carved and painted in ivory panels depicting the King and the Queen in gracious scenes. This may well explain the frequent speculation that the wealth of the Egyptian state was under guardianship of both King and Queen.

Nigeria

From Nigeria there is evidence in Benin, the capital city of the Edo-speaking people, of the role of women as queenmothers. A collection of 16th century art contains a magnificent bronze head of a queenmother. It is claimed that Oba Esigie who ruled up to about 1550 was the first to confer the title of Queenmother on his own mother. Since that time, each Benin Oba or King, conferred the title on his mother three years after accession to the throne (Eyo & Willet 1980). There is a similar head of a queen in terracotta, from an archaeological site called Ita Yemoo in Ife (Eyo 1970), with a five-tiered, beaded crown indicating that it was a queen.¹ Again, the importance of women in the traditional political hierarchy is demonstrated.

Ghana

From Ghana, historical evidence indicates that the office of the *Okyeame*, the chief's 'Spokesman', originated through a woman. This is an important point to emphasize when discussing the role of the

1 This object, which has traces of red and white paint on the crown and red paint on the necklaces, lips, ears and forehead, is at the Museum of Ife.

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Okyeame in the traditional African political organisation of the Akan peoples, whose social organisation is matrilineal.

According to Nana Osei Bonsu, who was interviewed in 1976 (Cole & Ross 1978), the origin of the office of the *Okyeame* is set in the reign of the third Asante chief, Nana Oti Akenten, who was the predecessor of King Osei Tutu. This first Asante *Okyeame* is said to have been an old woman, called Nana Amoah. It is claimed that whenever anyone did wrong in those days people would run to the old woman, Nana Amoah, and ask her to defend the offender before the Asantehene. This old woman, bent with age, could walk only with the help of two sticks. According to oral tradition, she always stood before the King with the two sticks and rejected his offer of a seat. Nana Amoah argued eloquently and logically after citing strong past historical events and proverbs as well as rules. Such offenders were almost invariably freed. When she died, her son Adoku used her walking sticks to honour her and to show that his mother's wisdom and eloquence lived on. With his mother's eloquence, Adoku performed with equal success. The Asantehene, Nana Oti Akenten, admired his work and eventually appointed him to argue in State cases. According to Cole and Ross (1978) this story supports the argument that the first *Okyeame* was a woman and it was through her that the Asante came to use the 'spokesman's staff'.

W.E. Ward (1948), a prominent historian, has suggested a different view that traces the creation of the office of the *Okyeame* to the second chief of the State of Adansi, Nana Ewurade Basa, about 400 years ago. The late Kyeremanteng claimed that the 'spokesman's staff' derived from decorated war clubs such as those found today among chiefs in Northern Ghana. This claim, however, is rejected by Cole and Ross, who emphasize that Asante elders confirm that the first staff was of a tree called *asempa ye tia*, i.e. 'a good argument is short' or 'truth is brief'. Nana Amoah's walking sticks were called by this name, to symbolize her ability to make good and reasonable arguments in the chief's court.

It is important to examine as well the role of queenmothers as they have played a vital role in many parts of Ghana since ancient times. Among the Akuapim, for example, the Queenmother plays an important role during the Odwira festival which is one of the principal annual festivals of many Akan societies in Ghana. This festival involves propitiating the spirits of the land and the renewal of ancestral solidarity within the state and individual clans or families. There is one day of feasting, and, according to Opoku (1970), on that day the ceremonial dishes (one of which is saltless

mashed yam) are carried by women in a procession to the shrine called *Nsorem*. In the royal procession the Queenmother is given a special place as she rides in state to a durbar ground, to symbolise her importance as mother to all. Similarly, during the yam festival of the people of Aburi (also in Southern Ghana), before the priest crosses the threshold of the fetish house to outdoor the new yam, sacred beads are tied around his knees. Traditionally, this is done by a specially-designated woman. During the Akwambo festival of the Fante, Gomea and Agona of coastal Ghana, it is the woman *okomfo* (priestess) who pours libation to the 'god of the well', Oburatakofi, who according to tradition provided water to the people who settled around its banks. The parts played by women in the Ca Homowo festival or the Ada Asafotu Fiam are known to involve their intensive participation especially in the ceremonies related to the offering of sacrificial foods and drinks (Opoku 1970).

In 1975, an excavation was conducted at a site at Efutu near Cape Coast (Agorsah 1987). The Efutu people belong to a Guang linguistic group, one of the major linguistic groups in Ghana. One spectacular find was a burial of a well-built, beautiful, woman with heavy bead adornments around the waist, wrists and neck. A smoking pipe, a gold finger ring, a brass bowl placed under the head of the woman (possibly indicating a queen), and other items were found with this burial. Some of these articles show clearly the significant role played by women among the coastal Guang in the past (Agorsah 1987).

In the early part of the year 1900, several attempts were made by the British colonial government to seize the 'Golden Stool' of the powerful Kingdom of Asante. The result of these attempts, the Yaa Asantewa War, was named after the leader and Chief Commander of the Asante, Yaa Asantewa, the Queenmother of Edweso which was one of the principal traditional areas of the Asante Kingdom at the time. The able leadership of this woman warrior and the spectacular victory over the British colonial army is still widely recounted and documented (Ward 1962; Wasserman 1961; Metcalfe 1964; Balmer 1925). The strength and authority of Yaa Asantewa flourishes in modern times as is evidenced in the prayers said for her during celebrations.

When a King has passed away among the Asante and has been laid in state, it is the Queenmother who becomes the regent and exercises the powers of the King until a successor has been elected and installed. As she assumes responsibility for the royal household, she must provide subsistence and generally take care of the departed King's household including his personal attendants and wives. Meanwhile, the prospective contenders intensify their approaches to

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the elders who have a say in the selection and final election of the new King.

Although the final election is discussed by a special council convened for the purpose by the Queenmother, she gives the final endorsement based on interpretations of the traditional rules and proven qualifications of the candidates. In other words, she wields power and influence at that crucial time, with the support of the royal households concerned. It is not unlikely that her personal influence could be brought to bear on the final selection of a new King. Among the Akan, this situation is interpreted as a clear and concrete demonstration of women's political power.

Until a nomination is acceptable to the special council and ultimately to the people, the Queenmother, as regent, can have her stool placed where the King normally sits. This is a further sign of her authority which no other chief or elder in the Asante state enjoys. In fact, before the King-elect is sworn in only the Queenmother's musicians are allowed to provide music. It is she also who authorises the elders of state to introduce the new King to the people and allows the chief 'spokesman' to deliver the people's messages and wishes to the King-elect. In addition, the new King lowers his clothes to his waist, a sign of respect to his elders and people, to swear the oath of allegiance and his office. The sword must first be pointed towards the Queenmother. Thereafter, he turns around to swear to other chiefs of state. It is the Queenmother who leads the custodian of the jewelery box of the Kingdom (containing the King's wealth) and the chiefs to pay homage and bless the new King.

The important role played by a woman in political affairs can also be seen among the Krobo of southern Ghana. Among them, during the swearing-in ceremony of a new Chief, a woman prominently commands affairs. This woman is the most important and oldest among the old ladies of the Chief's house and the one who in olden days had accompanied the Chief to war and prepared food for the him, who opens deliberations by swearing an oath translated as follows:

I swear this oath, I am a woman. But if there is war and I should refuse to prepare porridge for you to eat so that you may get strength to fight a glorious battle, I should rather sacrifice my own head.

According to Huber (1963) it is only after this oath that the senior kinsmen, elders, and other important personalities can swear allegiance to the new Chief. While the rest of the people swear allegiance the women hold porridge sticks (symbol of their vocation)

while the men hold a ceremonial sword. Sometimes the oldest woman has to be specially invited to perform her role and her refusal could generate a ritual problem or a delay in the making of a new Krobo Chief.

Atwode, a Guang-speaking people of the northern Volta basin of Ghana, refer to the Queenmother as *Nurakyesa*, meaning 'the lord chief'. She receives respect equal to that of the Chief himself. Even the most elderly people among the Ewe of Akpini traditional area of Ghana refer to their Queenmother as *Miano*, meaning 'our mother'. Indeed, she is the mother of all (Agorsah 1987).

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone includes a number of ethnic groups that still exhibit strong elements of the independent and powerful political role played by women. For example, among the Yalunka women have traditionally performed political and economic functions in areas often reserved for men in other societies. In its history, one finds a chain of women leaders. In the 1970s in particular, ten of the 81 paramount chiefs in Sierra Leone were women and even in more recent times Sierra Leone has had more women serve as cabinet ministers than in most other societies.

Conclusions

In the societies examined in this paper the unique position of the woman makes her a special leader. Clearly, societies exist where women are symbolically demeaned, politically dominated and economically controlled by men. Examples such as the Kpelle and Gola of Liberia and formerly the Tiv of Nigeria (Bohannan 1968) and the Konso of Ethiopia can be cited. Developments or changes may have occurred but men have so long dominated the scene, that the contribution of women is completely obscured. A few traditional areas which have become aware of this are now restoring a rightful place in their political organisation to women.

In this brief review of the part played by women in African political systems, several things are clear. Certain aspects of political authority have historically been rooted in or linked with the social positions of women. In addition, certain positions held now only by men originated through women. An example mentioned was that of the 'spokesman' among the Asante. However, because few women occupy traditional leadership positions in contemporary society

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misconceptions still persist in many African societies. Changes in certain traditional practices that still exist in some African societies should definitely occur but practices which afforded an important role to women should also be renewed and recognized.

One of the misconceptions about the African woman is that she does not possess the necessary attributes for leadership. She is believed to be compliant, too submissive and emotional and to have great difficulty in making decisions. Furthermore, women are generally characterised as being dependent, passive, fragile, non-aggressive and non-competitive. Clearly, those claims do not have support in traditional history and practice.

The main lesson from the above is that women may themselves become important political actors who not only substantially influence the public political affairs of men from behind the scenes, but themselves pursue strategies of controlling power and authority. However, despite such political activity in their own right and their contributions to the authority of male political leaders, there continue to be strong beliefs, which are not supported by research data, about differences in personality traits and leadership styles between female leaders and their male counterparts. Thus, contrary to popular belief, female leaders are not more emotional and suggestible, or less decisive or aggressive and objective than male leaders. Women leaders appear to behave in a fashion similar to their male colleagues. As a result, the qualities required of a queenmother have been the same as that required of male leaders, i.e. level-headed, honest and hard-working.

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